DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 307 001 JC 890 247

AUTHOR Cohen, Marlene C.; Engleberg, Isa N.
TITLE Focus Group Research: Procedures and Pitfalls.
PUB DATE 7 May 89
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Convention of the Eastern Communication Association (Ocean City, MD, May 7, 1989).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrative Principles; College Planning; Community Colleges; Guidelines; *Institutional Research; *Research Methodology; *Self Evaluation (Groups); Teacher Participation; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS *Focus Groups Approach

ABSTRACT

Focus group research, which involves the exploration of a carefully selected research question by a group of homogeneous subjects, is a qualitative research tool which seems to be a quick and easy means of staying abreast of the educational needs and expectations of community colleges. However, it is difficult to moderate focus groups and interpret their results, and, therefore, focus group research is often misused. To be successful and avoid inherent pitfalls, focus group research should follow three guidelines: (1) collegewide administrative procedures should be established for all focus group research, including provisions for the authorization of focus group research, the selection and training of focus group moderators, the recruitment of focus group subjects, and the appropriate interpretation of focus group results; (2) the focus group moderator should be a professionally trained member of the community college faculty and staff, rather than a marketing consultant from an outside agency who generally lacks understanding of the nature or scope of a community college and, as a result, often misinterprets the group members' answers; and (3) the process of interpreting focus group results must be carefully monitored and regulated, with particular caution taken in drawing conclusions from focus group responses. Maintaining a consistent methodology and deriving results from multiple focus groups of the same population will make focus group research a more valuable and worthwhile endeavor. (ALB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED307001

FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH: PROCEDURES AND PITFALLS

by

Marlene C. Cohen and Isa N. Engleberg
Prince George's Community College
Largo, Maryland 20772-2199
301-322-0929

Abstract

Focus group research is a qualitative research tool well suited for community colleges. Focus group research appears to be a quick and easy means of staying abreast of the educational needs and expectations of the community college. To be successful and avoid inherent pitfalls, however, focus group research should follow three guidelines: (1) College-wide administrative procedures should be established; (2) On-campus moderators should be selected and professionally trained; and (3) Results should be carefully analyzed and controlled.

Eastern Communication Association Convention
Ocean City, Maryland

May 7, 1989

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

M. C. Cohen

I. Engleberg

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

JC 890 247

FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH: PROCEDURES AND PITFALLS

Isa N. Engleberg and Marlene C. Cohen
Prince George's Community College, MD

INTRODUCTION

Focus Group research is, seemingly, miraculous. Because it boasts the twin virtues of efficiency and effectiveness, focus groups have begun to made significant inroads into institutional research at community and four-year colleges.

Focus group research is an exploratory, qualitative research technique in which a group of homogeneous subjects discuss a carefully-selected research question. In advertising, focus groups are used to test new product ideas, evaluate commercials and explore consumer opinion. In the political arena, they are used to intepret poll results and predict voter behavior. In education, focus group can help identify target groups, assess publications, develop and test survey instruments, check assumptions regarding academic programs and gather data about the needs of specific student and community groups.

Given such diverse applications of one research tool, it is easy for a community college researcher to be seduced by focus groups. And, like many seductions, it can get you into trouble. Because focus groups are increasingly used in

community college research, we believe there is a good chance they will be misused. As Bellenger et al (1976, p. 2) cautioned, "Focus group interviews are easy to set up, difficult to moderate and interpret, and are therefore very easily misused." However, when used properly, focus groups can be the answer to an institutional researcher's prayer.

At Prince George's Community College in Maryland, focus groups have been used to determine how the college might better serve diverse student populations including delayed entry, adult and high risk students. Focus groups also were utilized to probe feelings and impressions for the creation of a new graphic identity system. Part of the credit for the College's significant success with focus group research was the development of college-wide procedures for its use based on a careful examination of the focus group process.

GUIDELINES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Our investigation of the successful use of focus groups has led us to advocate the adoption of the following three guidelines for community college focus group researchers:

1. Community colleges should establish a college-wide administrative procedure for all focus group research.
2. On-campus focus group moderators should be carefully selected and trained members of the community college faculty and staff.

3. Community college focus group results should be carefully analyzed and controlled.

1. Administrative Procedure

Because focus groups appear to be easy to organize and conduct, an eager researcher or faculty member may be tempted to use focus groups without authorization or cautious regard for the consequences. We strongly recommend that community colleges establish administrative procedures for the use of focus groups. Such a procedure should include provisions for the authorization of focus group research, the selection and training of focus group moderators, the selection and treatment of focus group subjects and the appropriate use of focus group results.

Those who initiate and conduct research should be clearly distinguished from those who moderate focus groups. A researcher who wants funding for a pet project could, as a moderator, subtly encourage focus group participants to endorse such a proposal. We strongly recommend that a focus group moderator never be a representative of the area being researched. The Administrative Procedure No. 16 (Attachment) at Prince George's Community College, for example, requires the appointment of a research project leader and a separate, independent, focus group moderator assigned to that research project. The project leader is responsible for identifying and explaining the research goals to the moderator, physical arrangements for the focus group, helping locate and invite

focus group participants and incorporating focus group results into a total research plan. The moderator plans, conducts and summarizes the focus group interviews.

Without the stipulations and precautions of a clear administrative policy, disorganized, highly disruptive, and biased research efforts can result.

2. Trained Moderator

The key element in determining the success of a focus group is the moderator. Often described in marketing literature as a person who can establish rapport and be intuitive, few moderators are trained in the specific skills needed to make focus groups successful. The moderator must initiate and encourage open participation while guiding participants through a carefully-prepared agenda. The behavior of the moderator can lead to biased or misinterpreted results, even inadvertently. Unlike a quantitative survey in which the results may be summarized and analyzed by many researchers, the results of a focus group are dependent, in large part, on one person's guidance and interpretation.

A common source of focus group moderators is outside consulting agencies. There are three disadvantages to using such moderators. The most obvious is cost. It would not be

unusual for a consulting firm to charge thousands of dollars to conduct a series of on-campus focus groups. A second disadvantage is the gap in focus-group training among marketing consultants. Hollander and Dromaner (1986, p. 46) lamented that of the nation's top 25 graduate business schools, not one offered courses in qualitative research techniques. Topics such as focus groups or one-on-one interviewing received little or no attention. Just because a marketing company or consultant is well respected does not guarantee a moderator trained in focus group techniques.

The third disadvantage relates to the unique characteristics of the community college being studied. Rarely can outside consultants understand the nature of a community college or the scope of its programs. It is too easy for a consultant to ask the wrong questions or misinterpret the answers. For example, we observed one professional consultant conducting a focus group in which he asked students to list words describing their community college. The word "easy" was frequently mentioned. Without knowing a great deal about the community college being surveyed, it was understandable for the consultant to assume the students had chosen this community college because it was academically "easier" or had lower standards than the nearby university. Our own focus group research indicated that students who used the term "easy" were not referring to academic rigor but the ease with which they could succeed at the

community college. It was "easier" to register, park, obtain counseling and be assisted with course work by a faculty member. Failure to ask for clarification of this term could have resulted in a serious misunderstanding of student perceptions.

The second source of focus group moderators is the campus. Here too, there are different but equally important disadvantages to consider. The first is the lack of training. Just because a person may have experience conducting meetings or leading classroom discussions does not mean he or she can conduct a focus group effectively. Moderators must have specific focus group training, an understanding of group dynamics and sophisticated ccmmunications skills. At Prince George's Community College, a twelve-hour training program has been developed which selects and trains focus group moderators. Such training develops competence in five important skill areas:

1. Group Process (norms, risk-taking, roles, climate)
2. Group Leadership Skills (facilitating participation)
3. Communication Skills (listening, nonverbal, language)
4. Discussion Guide Preparation (agenda preparation and use)
5. Report Writing (summarizing, analyzing, and reporting results)

Only selected individuals who have successfully completed such training are permitted to conduct focus groups for the community college.

A second disadvantage to using on-campus focus group moderators is the inherent bias which may exist in a moderator. Depending on the morale of a faculty/staff member who serves as a focus group moderator, there may be a tendency to encourage participants to make positive and/or negative comments about instruction or administrative policies. The clear separation of the research project leader and the more objective focus group moderator can reduce such bias. Such an arrangement leaves the moderator with the three important tasks of developing the discussion guide, leading the discussion, and assisting in the interpretation of results for the written report.

In the final analysis, we believe that the use of a well-trained on-campus focus group moderator can serve the community college as well as an off-campus consultant. Certainly, a consultant can be used to help train focus group moderators and researchers or persuade faculty and administrators that focus group research is useful. When dealing with important community groups, the use of a marketing agency moderator may add prestige to a research project. In the end, however, it is the well-trained campus-based moderator who can best recognize the appropriate application of focus group research and best interpret the results. Of all our recommendations, the need for well-trained expert moderators is the most important. Without a trained moderator, it is impossible to ensure the efficiency or effectiveness of focus group research.

3. Interpretation of Results

The most seductive aspect of focus group research is the temptation to use the raw data results as the basis for final decision-making. Focus group research is a way to get a "feel" for the populations being studied. It should not substitute for more significant and substantive quantitative research. Those who interpret focus group results should be cautious as they draw conclusions from focus group responses. Otherwise, there is a real danger that focus groups will become "another opinion poll technique without the rigid controls necessary for good quantitative research." (Wyatt, 1988, p. 11)

Due to the interpersonal nature of the group, researchers may give too much credence to an idea voiced by an articulate participant, even if hundreds of surveys say otherwise. Projecting the opinion of eight to twelve focus group subjects to an entire population is folly. But, as Pope (1981, p. 189) pointed out, "it is done all too often." Focus group results should be drawn from multiple focus groups of the same population and combined with telephone interviews and/or surveys to reach conclusions.

The interpretation of focus group results which involves nothing more than the moderator's report and reactions to the focus group are the least useful form of analysis. Such reports

often lack reliability and waste the rich data offered by focus group participants. The interpretation process should be based on a consistent method-based approach to analysis. (Shields, 1988, p. 29) Based on the researchers expertise, these methods can vary from rhetorical to psycholinguistic analysis. Regardless of the choice of analytical approach, the content of focus group discussions should be analyzed as a whole and checked for replication of themes both within and across the groups. With a clear, method-based approach to analysis, focus groups can become a valuable part of a community college's research plan.

CONCLUSION

Focus groups can assist a community college in the development of survey instruments, the creation of a logo, the analysis of community needs and preliminary testing of programming ideas. They also can help in the interpretation of quantitative research data. When survey results aren't clear, focus groups can help the researcher understand why subjects responded as they did. The focus group is a beginning. It is a means. We would be highly suspicious of any policy decision or action taken solely on the basis of a focus group interview. This "fast and cheap" research method may be nothing more than "quick and dirty" unless it is used appropriately and properly.

Focus groups are uniquely suited to the research needs of community colleges. As such they will be used more frequently throughout the country. Before embracing this seemingly miraculous research tool, community colleges should give serious consideration to adopting a set of guidelines similar to those described in this article. The importance of research to the community college is too crucial to let a valuable research tool go to waste. However, without clear procedures, expert and well-trained moderators, and carefully controlled interpretation of results, the focus group interview method can send a community college in directions it has no place going. Used properly, focus group research can be as miraculous as it appears.

REFERENCES

Bellenger, D. N., Bernhardt, D. I. & Goldstucker, J. L. Qualitative research in marketing. American Marketing Association Monograph Series #3. Chicago, IL: American Marketing Association, 1976.

Bonnett, S. Focus on your audience. Case Currents, May, 1987, 32-38.

Hollander, S. L. and Dromaner, D. S. Seminars fill gap in focus group training. Marketing News, January 3, 1986, 46.

Pope, J. Practical marketing research. New York, NY: AMACOM, 1981.

Prince George's Community College. Administrative Procedure No. 16: Focus Group Research Procedures. March, 1988.

Shields, D. C. Communication Based Focus Group Interviews: A Speech Communication Association Short Course Manual. Presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, New Orleans, November, 1988.

Wyatt, N. Critique of Focused Group Interviewing as a Research Technique. Paper presented at the Eastern Communication Associaton Convention, Baltimore, May, 1988

Projected Costs for Focus Group/Market Research

Costs per focus group session:

- Facilitator (10 hours x $25 an hour)	$ 250
- Honoraria for Participants (10 participants x $25)	$ 250
- Refreshments	$ 50
- Supplies (audio tapes, word processing diskettes, etc.)	$ 20
TOTAL	$ 570

Effective Date: March 25, 1988

ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges JUL 07 1989